

Democrats need to keep openness promise

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By circumventing their own rules regarding clear identification of earmarks, House Democrats are breaking their promise to implement more open government. Legislative ease is no excuse to break the rules. They need to keep their promise.

When voters chose Democratic representatives and made it possible to capture the majority in Congress, members promised to keep the light of day shining on the legislative process, just as they promised to control fraud and corruption. They were even applauded for their efforts at openness.

An order handed out recently by the House Appropriations Committee chairman to wait until a spending bill is ready to be sent to the president for signature takes the process back to conditions Democrats were elected to remedy. The order has the ring of efforts to evade.

The sheer number of requests makes review prohibitive. It is tempting to want to disencumber the spending bills, ease debate and passage of the legislation and to hear the earmarks later. The problem is there could be no later for most of these requests. Postponing them has the effect of attaching them to the spending bills too late to be reviewed. Eliminating 36,000 earmark requests from spending bills certainly would make the process clearer. It would not necessarily make it cleaner.

Voters back home expect their representatives to grease the fiscal wheels that will build bridges, dams, highways and transportation systems they cannot afford. Also, the other lawmakers should have the right to review each others' requests. And that takes time. In the past, before an amendment sponsored by Nevada's U.S. Sen. John Ensign, an earmark could hold up -- or even kill -- an entire bill. There is no reason now, however, to slide them through under the radar. That's not what voters interested in openness want to see.

Washington watchers and other lawmakers of the toll that special project requests can take during the drafting and approval process. Subjecting them to questions of appropriateness, affordability and priority can easily spell the death of a proposal.

It is too bad that the members have so many earmarks to review. And it has been said before that taxpayers deserve to know what plans are being made for spending their money. Including earmarks with spending bills can amount to hiding, given the sheer number and volume of the bills themselves. But it is better to include them there, where there is the chance they can come up for discussion, than to postpone them until they have no chance at all.